

DECLARATIVE AND POETIC SYMBOLS IN ART STUDENTS' EXPLORATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL RENEWAL THROUGH LANTHIMOS'S BUGONIA

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Abstract

This paper presents a visual arts project in higher education that engages students' environmental concerns through film-based learning and creative practice. Four published posters from Yorgos Lanthimos's *Bugonia*, designed by Vasilis Marmatakis, functioned as a shared point of departure for examining how ecological crisis can be rendered intelligible through symbolic work, reframing and digital transformation. The enquiry considers what these images communicate with relative directness, while also asking what meanings emerge when publicity material is detached from narrative sequence and encountered as autonomous visual artefacts. The workshop draws conceptually on *Bugonia*, as described in Virgil's *Georgics* and Pliny's *Natural History*, where bees are said to arise from the carcass of an ox. This image of life emerging from decay is employed as an interpretive lens through which students consider renewal without recourse to idealised notions of repair. Read alongside the film's black-comic premise, the title's classical allusion also brings collective labour, ecological fear and sacrificial logic into view. Within this framework, bees and wings remain legible as signs of pollination, labour and ecological interdependence, while bodily exposure and planetary form register damage, contamination and vulnerability. Students were asked to distinguish between declarative symbols—stable, recognisable and socially legible—and poetic symbols, which operate more indirectly, affectively and with greater openness to subjective interpretation. Working in four groups, students progressed through close observation, discussion, digital intervention and reflective comparison. Their processes included inversion, equalisation, solarisation, layering and compositing, employed to test how visual meaning shifts when familiar signs are displaced without being erased. The transformed posters subsequently became the primary visual material for thematic analysis. Across the outcomes, stable symbols of exposure, planetary fragility and insect life did not disappear; rather, they were reconfigured into denser ecological images in which vulnerability, interdependence and instability became more perceptible. The paper argues that the movement from declarative to poetic symbolism offered students a practical means of reimagining ecological renewal as visually constructed, unstable and more-than-human.

Keywords: *Climate change education, project based learning, visual literacy, poster analysis, Bugonia.*

1. Introduction

Students often enter visual culture classrooms with a high degree of fluency in recognition, yet demonstrate less ease in engaging with uncertainty; this tension informs the interpretive orientation of the present study. Rather than treating images as stable carriers of meaning, the workshop approached the *Bugonia* posters as sites in which interpretation unfolds through engagement, transformation and re-reading. This position aligns with social semiotic perspectives, where visual meaning is understood as structured yet open to reconfiguration through context and use, as argued by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), as well as with visual methodologies that foreground reflexive interpretation as a situated practice, as discussed by Rose (2023). As a filmic point of departure, *Bugonia* is especially generative because its official framing as a dark comedy centred on two conspiracy-obsessed men who kidnap the chief executive of a major company, convinced that she is an alien intent on destroying Earth, already places ecological fear, corporate power and unstable belief into tense relation (Focus Features, 2025). Within Lanthimos's black-comic register, this premise makes symbolic instability especially productive: what presents itself to the abductors as a sacred mission of planetary rescue stages conspiratorial thinking as a contemporary form of nemesis through which those tensions are violently refracted. It also places the threatened body under a sacrificial pressure that brings it close to what Agamben (2017) terms bare life. Within this framework,

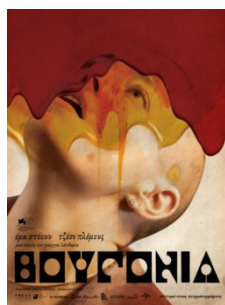
digital manipulation is not conceived as a secondary operation but as integral to the interpretive process itself. As Skains (2024) suggests, practice-based approaches enable knowledge to emerge through iterative making, while thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2021), allows patterns of meaning to develop through sustained engagement rather than extraction. In this sense, uncertainty does not signal interpretive failure; rather, it sustains critical attention and reinforces the understanding that meaning remains contingent and relational. Against this background, the study is guided by two questions: how do students identify and differentiate declarative and poetic symbols within the *Bugonia* posters, and how do digital manipulation reorganise those symbols into new ecological meanings?

2. Theoretical framework

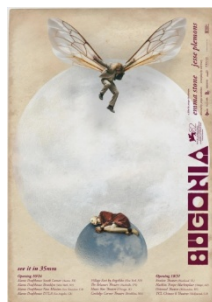
The interpretive dimension of digital image practices may be reconsidered beyond linear narratives of technological progress through a framework that foregrounds the stratified nature of media time. Rather than treating digital images as exclusively contemporary artefacts, such a perspective situates them within layered historical and material conditions, wherein past media forms, residual visual logics and technical affordances continue to shape present modes of seeing and meaning-making. As Jussi Parikka (2012) argues, media are embedded in material and cultural strata that exceed their immediate function, while Wolfgang Ernst (2013) foregrounds the operational temporality of media systems, emphasising the ways in which technological processes structure perception. From this perspective, digital transformations of images are not merely aesthetic manipulations but constitute interventions into the temporal and material conditions of visibility (Dvořák & Parikka, 2021). Here, media archaeology frames an approach attentive to how images retain earlier regimes while generating new ecological meanings. This is especially pertinent to Lanthimos's visual world, where bodily exposure and gesture have been read as sites of biopolitical pressure (Comanducci, 2024), and to the Greek Weird Wave more broadly, whose stylised forms have likewise been understood through tensions between regulation, embodiment and social order (Papanikolaou, 2021). The distinction between declarative and poetic symbols proves particularly productive, enabling a nuanced account of how visual signs operate across varying degrees of stability and openness. Declarative symbols tend to stabilise meaning through recognisable forms, whereas poetic symbols introduce forms of indeterminacy that resonate with the layered temporality central to media archaeological thought.

The emphasis on transformation as a mode of enquiry aligns with practice-based research, wherein making constitutes a form of knowledge production. Skains (2024) highlights that creative processes generate insights not fully accessible through discursive analysis alone, thereby reinforcing media archaeology's concern with the material and procedural dimensions of media. Digital interventions, therefore, do not simply alter visual surfaces but engage underlying conditions of possibility, revealing how meaning emerges through processes of layering, repetition and variation. At the same time, the ecological dimension of this approach is sharpened by Krenak (2023), who challenges anthropocentric assumptions regarding the value of nature. This position also resonates with recent work in environmental visual culture (Demos, 2023). Read alongside environmental humanities scholarship that foregrounds relational and plural understandings of value, this perspective shifts interpretation away from representation towards interdependence. As Buitendijk et al. (2024) argue, ecological meaning emerges through relational networks rather than discrete entities, a position reflected in the unstable and layered qualities of digitally transformed images. Consequently, an interpretive approach grounded in media archaeology enables a reconsideration of digital image practices as both historically situated and environmentally responsive. By tracing how visual forms persist, mutate and recombine across media contexts, this framework foregrounds the temporal continuities shaping contemporary image-making, framing uncertainty not as a lack of meaning but as a condition through which new ecological relations become perceptible.

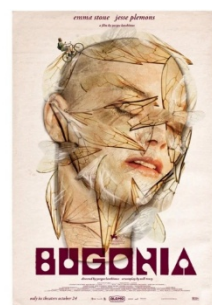
Figure 1. *Bugonia* film posters designed by Vasilis Marmatakis.



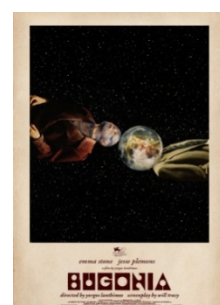
Poster 1



Poster 3



Poster 4



Poster 5

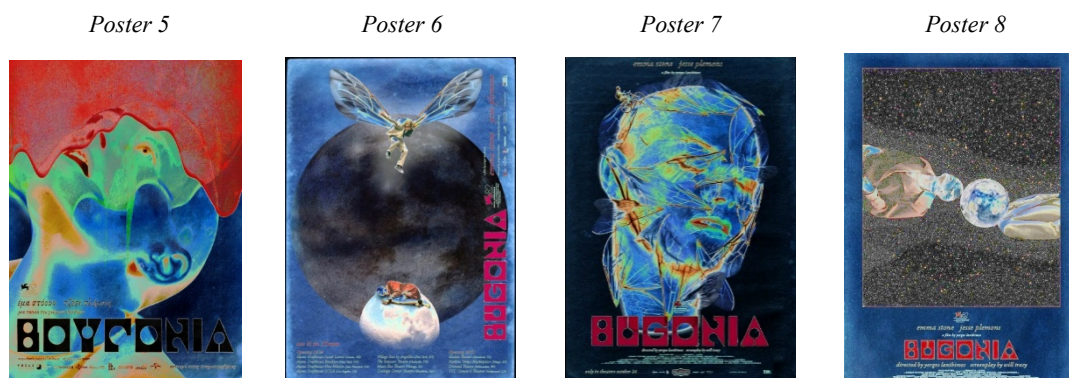
3. Methodology and teaching scenario

The workshop was conducted with twenty postgraduate students, organised into four groups within a higher education, studio-based context. At Ionian University, the project was positioned within the wider pedagogical framework of the Joint Postgraduate Programme ‘New Technologies in Environmental Education and Sustainable Development’ (NTEES), jointly offered by the Department of Environment and the Department of Audio and Visual Arts, and in relation to the elective spring-semester 2025–2026 course *Environmental Aesthetics and Education*. Students began with close observation and careful description of the posters, approached as designed visual constructions rather than neutral publicity material. Marmatakis’s portfolio situates *Bugonia* within an ongoing series of collaborations with Lanthimos, making the continuity of graphic authorship visible (Marmatakis, n.d.). This emphasis on contemporary Greek cinema as a resource for visual pedagogy also resonates with Panagopoulos and Papadopoulou’s (2019) discussion of Weird Wave aesthetics in relation to teaching technologies in art education. A structured discussion followed, distinguishing between declarative symbols and those of a more open, poetically inflected character. Students then undertook a series of targeted digital interventions, including inversion, equalisation, solarisation, layering and compositing. These processes were framed not as technical exercises but as a means of testing how visual meaning might shift through transformation. The resulting images were treated as the primary visual material of the study and were accompanied by brief discussion notes that clarified the direction of interpretation. Analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, drawing on Braun and Clarke (2021), with particular attention to recurring patterns in the ways meaning was reorganised across the outputs. The transformed images and accompanying notes were considered together, allowing visual and verbal articulations to inform one another. Rather than remaining descriptive, the analysis unfolded through iterative engagement with the material, where shifts in colour, texture and composition—such as the displacement of natural flesh tones into more artificial or chemically inflected palettes—were grouped into broader patterns of meaning. These patterns coalesced into three interrelated themes: ecological vulnerability, posthuman hybridity, and an atmosphere of menace. This clustering did not fix interpretation but demonstrated how digital interventions unsettled more direct, declarative readings, opening towards forms of symbolic ambiguity in which ecological meaning appeared unstable, relational and affectively charged. Emphasis was placed on moments where descriptive clarity gave way to more open-ended interpretation, allowing uncertainty to function as a productive condition of analysis, in line with Hellman and Karlsson Häikiö (2024). In this way, the process traced not only the persistence of recognisable symbols, but also the ways in which meaning remained contingent and relational.

4. Case studies / analysis of transformations

The first transformation (Poster 5 in Figure 2) retains the face, liquid and exposed head of Poster 1 but overturns their chromatic logic. Inversion and equalisation turn flesh into blue-green topography and the dripping layer into a heated, unstable field. Declaratively, contamination and vulnerability remain. Poetically, however, the substance becomes harder to name: less honey, less blood, more climate, fever, chemical weather. Seen in light of Marmatakis’s account of the *Bugonia* poster series as offering differentiated visual routes into the film’s narrative rather than merely illustrating it (Bertoli, 2025), the intervention shifts the image from a relatively stable sign of bodily exposure towards a more diffuse sense of ecological atmosphere, as if skin and environment were no longer separable.

Figure 2. Digital transformations of the *Bugonia* posters produced by students.



In the second transformation (Poster 6 in Figure 2), the planetary sphere darkens and the wings acquire a spectral, electrically edged quality. The globe continues to read as world, the wings evoke insect life or hive logic, and the curled body signifies fragility. Yet chromatic inversion reconfigures the scene, rendering it less emblematic and more akin to an unstable habitat (Shobeiri & Westgeest, 2024). Against Bugonia's entanglement of bees, corporate power and planetary threat, such instability also recalls the abductors' sacrificial fantasy that one body might be offered up for the survival of the whole. The poetic symbol here does not introduce a new object, but rather establishes a new relational condition: the world becomes simultaneously enclosure, stage and threatened system. The third transformation (Poster 7 in Figure 2), intensifies the fragmentary logic of Poster 3. Wing veins traverse the head with increased visual force, and the face becomes a luminous terrain rather than a coherent portrait. At a declarative level, the image continues to present shaved-headed exposure, hybridisation and damage. Poetically, however, layering now suggests fractured perception and posthuman reconfiguration, a slippage consistent with readings of Lanthimos's cinema in which formal rigour and estrangement unsettle stable interpretation (Falvey, 2022). The human subject is not merely overlaid with insect form; it is rendered porous through it. It is at this point that the movement from declarative to poetic symbolism becomes most pronounced: the sign remains visible, yet its meaning loosens, expands and deepens. The fourth transformation (Poster 8 in Figure 2) extends the horizontal logic of Poster 4 into a darker, grainier field of suspension. Declaratively, the planetary sphere remains legible as world, while the flanking bodies register capture, distance and a strained relation between human scale and cosmic space. Poetically, however, the image holds the figure in a suspended state of exposure, as though vulnerability were drifting at the threshold between orbit, abduction and aftermath. The composition becomes less a resolved scene than an interval in which ecological threat is felt through estranged proximity rather than narrative closure.

5. Findings and discussion

Three findings recur across the workshop. First, the interventions clarified their own necessity by exposing latent symbolic tensions that close reading alone only partially disclosed. Second, declarative symbols proved durable without remaining fixed. Wings, planetary spheres, bodily exposure and contamination persisted through manipulation, yet no longer operated as singular meanings. Third, poetic symbolism emerged most forcefully when descriptive certainty weakened. Under such conditions, images invited ecological interpretation without collapsing into slogan. This was particularly important given Lanthimos's black-comic treatment of obsessive online conspiracism, which keeps the posters poised between declarative statement and poetic excess rather than allowing meaning to settle into a single message. This carries clear pedagogical significance. Rather than merely decorating posters, students used transformation as a means of thinking with images, a process that cultivates symbolic awareness, visual discrimination and ecological sensitivity in ways that align with recent work in arts-based environmental pedagogy by Farrar et al. (2024) and Gal (2022). In this respect, the workshop functioned less as an exercise in illustration and more as a form of enquiry.

6. Conclusion

The *Bugonia* workshop indicates that the combined use of poster analysis and digital intervention can operate as a concise yet conceptually grounded model of environmental image pedagogy. Rather than approaching interpretation as the extraction of pre-existing meaning, the distinction between declarative and poetic symbols enabled students to engage with images across shifting registers of stability and openness. In this context, transformation did not simply extend analytical observation, but reconfigured it, foregrounding interpretation as an active and materially situated process. Ecological meaning, therefore, does not reside within the image as content awaiting recognition. It emerges through situated practices of looking, altering and comparison, where meaning is continuously negotiated rather than fixed. What becomes visible through this process is not a resolved narrative of renewal, but a more complex condition in which persistence and vulnerability coexist. Renewal appears less as restoration than as a fragile continuity under pressure, marked by instability, exposure and ongoing transformation. In this sense, the workshop suggests that visual pedagogy can move beyond representational clarity towards forms of engagement that sustain ambiguity, allowing ecological relations to be encountered as dynamic, relational.

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